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Published version

EARLE, Harriet (2018). A new face for an old fight: Reimagining Vietnam in Vietnamese-American graphic memoirs. *Studies in Comics*, 9 (1), 87-105.

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A new face for an old fight: Reimagining Vietnam in Vietnamese-American graphic memoirs¹

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Abstract

The Vietnam War is arguably one of the most complex and significant conflicts in American history; the place it occupies in the American national story is particularly curious because it is one of the few wars that America did not win. It is also a benchmark of note because it allowed the comics form (which had been in decline since the advent of extreme censorship in the 1940s and 1950s) to be reborn; superheroes took hold of the comics mainstream again, prompted by their popularity with US troops in Asia. Since the 1970s rebirth of the mainstream, representations of Vietnam have branched off in two distinct directions: either bold, nationalistic stories of brave Americans 'saving' the Vietnamese or individualist stories, many of which are memoirs or follow a similar confessional structure. Contemporary renderings of Vietnam are more likely to subscribe to the second representational theme, and recent publications are now starting to tell the stories of those who were displaced and who experienced a very different war to the typical mainstream military narrative. This article will consider the trajectory of representations of the Vietnam War in American comics, concentrating specifically on the shift from gung-ho violence and patriotism to memoir. I will especially emphasise the turn from American military protagonists to Vietnamese civilians and their families. I will discuss two texts: *Vietnamerica* by GB Tran published in 2010 and Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* published in 2017. In my analysis of these comics, I will show how the form has embraced the memoir as a central genre and, furthermore, how comics is able to tell these stories in new, dynamic ways. I will show that Tran and Bui are part of a new age of

comics storytelling, that can deftly bring together nuanced personal narratives and memories of internationally impactful conflict to create a text that is at once educational, entertaining and affective. In this article, I hope to make a bold intervention into the current conversation on comics as both history and memoir, using texts that (at present) have received little academic interest.

Keywords

Vietnam

trauma

conflict

Vietnamerica

The 'Nam

The Best We Could Do

Few wars have become so central to the story of a generation, and indeed an entire nation, as the Vietnam War. However, the dominant narratives of the war have very little to do with the Vietnamese. Rather, it is the result of an intricate and ongoing process of US-centric mythogenesis, in which the US military appears victorious, despite the truth of the matter being markedly different. Literary scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen calls the war ‘more than just an object in the rearview mirror’ of American cultural memory, adding that ‘[it is] over, but its visual images live on’ (Nguyen 2015: 311). In this article, I discuss two contrasting sets of representations of the Vietnam War and consider what their differences mean for comics. I begin by outlining the dominant view of the war (henceforth referred to as ‘Vietnam’) and the types of comics that derive from this view. I then turn to contemporary representations of Vietnam in memoir. I consider the representation of conflict in *Vietnamerica* (Tran 2010) and

The Best We Could Do (Bui 2016), concentrating on the comics' central themes of family and national identity. I then compare these comics to the American mainstream Vietnam war series *The 'Nam* (Marvel, 1986–93), performing close readings of two scenes and considering what the shift in representational strategy and conflict framing means for narratives of Vietnam in particular and, more broadly, for comics of memory, violence and conflict.

The Vietnam War is, to date, the longest-running conflict in US history, lasting from 1 November 1955 to 30 April 1975. As I have discussed elsewhere, the war is unique in its timeline and reception in that it had neither clearly defined enemy nor battlefields, which fuelled anti-war protests in the United States and diminished morale of soldiers in theatre (Earle 2018). The Vietnam War marks a turning point in the diagnosis and treatment of war-related mental illness, typified in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a condition that had been discussed in both medical and cultural documents since the ancient Greeks, but which only enters the diagnostic arena in 1980. When asked to think of a visual narrative of Vietnam, the average (anglophone) person is spoiled for choice. Since the end of the war, it has become one of the most popular topics for American-made war films, surpassed only by the Second World War.² These films tend to follow the same basic plot line and consist of a small cast of stock characters. A young, naïve conscripted soldier arrives in Vietnam and is placed in a platoon of similarly unqualified soldiers, many of them plagued by drug dependency or unspecified mental health difficulties. The protagonist will witness horrific events and struggle with the internal politics of the platoon. Ultimately, he will survive but return home to the United States as a changed man. These films' trajectories have much in common with the typical structure of a *Bildungsroman* in that the protagonist must learn about himself and move through various states before 'arriving' at his mature, adult self. This model is most clearly

exemplified in Oliver Stone's award-winning *Platoon* (1986) and the character of Chris Taylor, played by Charlie Sheen.

In comics, too, this model has become the go-to for many war comics, a term I am employing as an umbrella for all comics that are primarily focussed on a conflict event between nations; the action within the comic is prompted by the external conflict event, to which the protagonists react. Vietnam is a key milestone in mainstream comics history, as it marks a significant upsurge in the popularity of superheroes and their return to prominence within the mainstream. Superhero comics had been less popular in the years directly following the Second World War, with horror and crime comics being the biggest sellers by a healthy margin. The implementation of the 1956 Comics Code Authority censored many of the narrative techniques and themes that were central to the most popular genres. For example, the CCA guidelines expressly forbid 'all scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, [and] masochism', as well as 'all lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations' (quoted in Nyberg 1994). Such representations of gore were central to the typical narratives in horror comics and to ban them meant to demand massive changes to the existing publications. In basic terms, this meant that their continued publication was no longer tenable and so superhero narratives were rebooted to fill the gap left in publication catalogues, as Richard Reynolds outlines in *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992); bold depictions of Manichean war stories with clear-cut heroes returned to newsstands and to their previous popular heights. Long-running titles such as *Our Army at War* (DC, August 1952 to February 1977), *Fightin' Army* (Charlton Comics, January 1956 to November 1984) and *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* (Marvel, May 1963 to December 1981), both of which were set during the Second World War, remained popular throughout the conflict in Vietnam.

These series, like many of the films released at the same time, showcased bold depictions of conflict that were carefully constructed to fit with the strict CCA guidelines and

still provide entertainment. They demonstrate the same manly camaraderie and much of the glorification of violence that characterises earlier representations of conflict, especially the Second World War, across popular forms. Films such as the John Wayne film *The Green Berets* (1968), which a *New York Times* review described as ‘unspeakable [...] stupid [...] rotten [...] false in every detail’, can be difficult to see as anything other than Hollywood propaganda (Adler 1968: 49). In addition, the music charts of the 1960s saw several overtly pro-war songs at top positions, including ‘The Ballad Of The Green Berets’, written by Staff Sgt. Barry Sadler, which spent five weeks at the top of the US Chart in 1966, and ‘Okie from Muskogee’, which earned the writer/performer Merle Haggard a trip to perform at the White House for Richard Nixon.

This model of conflict narrative is inherently flawed and exclusionary, while also contributing to the whitewashing and androcentricity of conflict experience. The protagonist is, almost always, a young, white, male soldier who leaves his tour having gone through a profound mental and emotional shift; the focus is firmly on the military conflict and Vietnam as a theatre of war, without nuance of the country itself. Additionally, any representation of the Vietnamese is a blanket image of the ‘evil other’, with combatants from both the north and south grouped together as ‘the aggressor’. As with all stereotypical renderings, this one is laced with a modicum of truth. The vast majority of service personnel *were* white American males – women were confined to support roles, mostly as nurses – and the vast majority of them were in their early 20s, according to statistics from the American War Library (American War Library Website 2018). However, the overall story that is told in the US-centric Vietnam narrative has no room for anyone who exists contrary to this stereotype, nor for the concept of an American defeat. This is not to say that the ‘classic’ Vietnam narrative has retained its Manichean emphasis. In an article published elsewhere, I have outlined the shift in focus from bold military success in theatre to traumatic memory among returned veterans (Earle 2018).

Since PTSD entered the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (the DSM)* in 1980, based heavily on psychological research that concentrated on Vietnam veterans, trauma has been a popular lens through which to view conflict narratives, as well as a widely used representational frame for the experiences of veterans. The shift towards traumatocentric narratives of conflict allows for the nuances of individual experience, while also eschewing any of the previously common glorification narrative. The visceral and intensely visual horror of Vietnam was broadcast nightly in every American home; it was no longer fitting to subscribe to traditional glory narratives. Literary Scholar Lucas Carpenter states that Vietnam 'squashes whatever remains of the Western metanarrative of history that accommodates war as a possible inevitable form of primal human collective behaviour [...] it was a chaotic quagmire with no clear boundaries and no easily identified enemy' (2003: 32, 35).

The shift towards trauma is only half of the story. The narrative of Vietnam that has been put forward up to this point excludes the Vietnamese as key players in the war that divided their country and affected at least 50 million people, not counting the last effects of the conflict on the country's development. When Vietnamese characters do appear, they are most often Viet Cong soldiers, with occasional appearances as interpreters, officers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) or as civilians. When Vietnamese women are shown, they are almost always sex workers, as is the case in comics including *The 'Nam* and *The Punisher*. In Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' 1986 *Watchmen* the only female Vietnamese character is a sex worker, while the most (in)famous representation of this character type is Papillon Soo Soo's portrayal of the anonymous sex worker who promises to 'love you long time' in *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick, 1987). In American-made military-centred narratives of Vietnam, the Vietnamese receive no positive input into their own representation and are used as bit players; in anglophone representations, this is the image of Vietnam that endures. As Nguyen writes, 'wealthy and powerful countries can export their memories more effectively than poorer ones'

(2015: 312). However, in recent years the accepted narrative is beginning to change. Both *Vietnamerica* (Tran 2010) and *The Best We Could Do* (Bui 2016) offer contrasting versions of the classic US-centric military narrative of Vietnam, instead using their own family histories to reposition the Vietnamese as central players in the conflict and create a narrative that demonstrates the costs of the war on the ordinary citizens of Vietnam. In resituating the conflict in the villages and daily lives of the Vietnamese, giving agency to Vietnamese characters and representing this mostly unspoken side of the conflict, Tran and Bui are able to crack open the shell protecting the US-centric representation of Vietnam. However, what is important to remember is that both of these artists are doing so from *within*: their books are written in English, published by US companies and created within entirely US contexts. Part of their success in subverting the classic Vietnam narrative is due to their infiltration of the cultural system that built it in the first place.

If one were to pick up either *Vietnamerica* or *The Best We Could Do* (henceforth *TBWCD*), expecting a vibrant war narrative, with bombs and detailed interactions between hardboiled military personnel, one would be disappointed. These two comics are not war comics in the sense that we may think but they still fit with the umbrella heading I gave at the beginning of this article, as the catalyst for action is a conflict and the characters are bound up in events that occur because of it. The US-centric comic of Vietnam is concerned solely with Americans, 8000 miles from home and in no way engaging in acts that then echo into their later lives (although we know from the huge numbers of returning veterans who were later diagnosed with PTSD or similar war-related mental health condition that the war experience had massive impact on them) (Kolb 1986). These comics are snapshots of the immediate moment, of the military task at hand. What Tran and Bui construct, in sharp contrast, is a multigenerational family saga, weaving their present-day experiences of life in the United States with their parents' and

grandparents' histories, stretching back to the French colonial presence in Vietnam and the twenty-year span of the conflict. The war is not simply one event among many; it is an ongoing narrative of colonial oppression and international intervention that has specific and targeted effects on those involved (whether by design or accident). For Tran and Bui, the Vietnam War is not *just* a military interaction between national players that occurred between 1955 and 1975. It is part of the enduring history of their family's home and their own personal identity construction.

Figure 1: *Vietnamerica*, GB Tran 2010: 2. © Penguin Random House. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

Vietnamerica opens with an image of a plane traversing a bright red sky, above Saigon (see Figure 1). A disembodied voice says, 'You know what your father was doing at your age? He [...] WE left Vietnam' (Tran 2010: 12). The first page of the text – indeed, the very first words – set up a disjunction between generations and give us the primary theme of the text: family histories and identity construction. The speaker is Tran's mother, Dzung, speaking as the family returns to Vietnam to visit; this is GB's first trip to his parents' homeland.³ Alaina Kaus writes that 'through this interplay between word and image, GB is able to span two temporal periods in one instance, juxtaposing them to emphasize the necessity of telling the past, which, though past, remains present' (2016: 5).

The decision to start this book by talking about departures and endings, despite it being in tandem with an arrival, is a curious one. Caroline Hong writes:

The nonlinear structure [...] depicting GB's trip narratively before his parents' much earlier return, serves to close the gap between the two trips and render the timeline of these histories less important than their parallel nature. Rather than emphasize chronology and hierarchy, Tran creates a genealogy that highlights shared

experiences across generations, something unimaginable to GB prior to his journey.

(2014: 15)

The family experience is the thing; for Tran, this text is an important intervention into his personal history and a document of 'overcoming'. It has been for him, rather than his parents, to overcome their past and understand its relationship to him. His return to Vietnam is an essential part of this overcoming because it gives location to his history. For Tran, who was born in the United States after his family's migration from Vietnam in 1975, he is a person of fragmented identity. However, through the act of telling the story of his family and their movement through French- and American-occupied Vietnam, to the Philippines and finally to the USA, becomes the act of remembering. As Kaus writes, 'graphic memoirs make it clear that their narratives are reconstructions but not reflections of the past. Viewers must acknowledge that they offer not objective authenticity but subjective accounting' (2016: 3). What Tran is doing is not telling his parents' story as a clear and historical narrative; he is telling his parents' story as it relates both to him directly and to the wider conflict – what does the constantly shifting socio-political situation in Vietnam mean for his family and, furthermore, how do they develop within it?

In contrast to American-born Tran, Thi Bui was born in Saigon and spent her first 3 years in Vietnam before her family left for the United States, via a refugee camp in Malaysia. Bui opens her book with a detailed and visceral description of the birth of her son. She uses this narrative of birth and creation to introduce the theme of family that runs through her work, similar to Tran's story. Both she and Tran position their parents as central figures in their own identity construction narratives and both consider the impact of their parents' traumatization on their own upbringing. In discussing her father's role as chief childminder while her mother worked in a circuit board factory, Bui describes her fear of him, adding 'I had

no idea that the terror I felt was only the long shadow of his own' (2017: 129). Throughout *TBWCD*, Bui places family landmarks and conflict landmarks in close contrast. Her sister, Bich, was born in January 1968 and 'two weeks later the Tet Offensive began' (2017: 48); her brother, Tam, was born in 1978 in the Malaysian refugee camp. Bui herself was born only a few months before the Fall of Saigon. In closely juxtaposing births and conflict events (which it would not be a stretch to conflate with 'deaths') on the page – often in adjoining or overlapping panels – Bui maps her own history onto the wider history of the country. Her family is breaking and remaking itself as the country does the same. The events that are mentioned received massive amounts of news coverage internationally, with nightly updates being broadcast on American television news. The number of servicemen killed in action was of interest; the number of babies born into conflict was not – this is the invisible counter-war, existing in parallel and in silence.

Figure 2: – *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui, 2017. p. 115. © Abram Comic Arts. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

The comparison between the familial and the national is not confined to her generation. In two vertical bandeau panels spanning a whole page, Bui remembers her father's disavowal of his father. The left-hand panel shows a young Nam scowling heavily, while memories of his father's bullying and physical abuse fill the panel behind him (see Figure 2). Thought bubbles emanating from the child read 'You [...] are not my papa' (Bui 2017: 115). The right-hand panel contains only a large mushroom cloud and the words 'That August, the US dropped two atomic bombs on Japan'. The pairing of these events does not only act as a time map for family events in Vietnam. The panels are of equal size, shape and position, removing any suggestion of a hierarchy of event. The moment in which Nam rejects his father (and all his father represents as both a man and a figurehead) is as cataclysmic in the boy's life as the dropping of the bombs

on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. This break in the family structure reshapes the family's future moving forward, just as the attacks on Japan reshaped the war in the Pacific.

Both *Vietnamerica* and *TBWCD* are populated almost entirely by Vietnamese characters (not counting GB, of course). The few exceptions are American soldiers, whose interactions within the story are limited. *Vietnamerica* gives detailed and rich descriptions of Vietnam during the French colonial occupation and explanations of the development of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong. The complexity of these histories, and of Tran's relationship to them, is stark and most clearly expressed in the figure of Huu Nghiep, his paternal grandfather. Tran's father, Tri, and his father are estranged; Tri does not remember him fondly and the depiction of Huu Nghiep is of a stern and cold figure, who did not care for his family. However, in a scene where Tri and GB visit Huu Nghiep's widow, this opinion is called into question. A painting displayed prominently is later revealed to be by Tri; unknown by him it was bought by Huu Nghiep at Tri's first exhibition. Though the hint is small, the prominence of the work within Huu Nghiep's home does not suggest as unsympathetic a character as Tri would have us believe. Huu Nghiep is representative of the political situation in Vietnam and the tearing of loyalties that occur in war time: on the one hand, a brave war hero and loyal member of the Communist regime, on the other, a man of wavering family allegiance.

TBWCD brings together the landmarks of international and of familial history. But Bui does not shy away from challenging the classic view of the Vietnam War and of the Vietnamese. Her father speaks of General Loan, made infamous in Eddie Adams' 1968 photograph *Saigon Execution*, with ambiguity, leaving Thi trying to decide whether or not her father supported the General's actions. These contradictions trouble her but 'so did the oversimplifications and stereotypes in American versions' of the war (Bui 2017: 207). She sees the stereotypes as being in three distinct groups: the 'good guys' (the Americans), the 'bad guys' (the Viet Cong, who are

‘very hard to see’) and the ‘South Vietnamese’ (encompassing ‘bar girls and hookers, corrupt leaders, small, effete men and papa-san’). The reader is, we hope, aware of the nuance and enormous complexity of the conflict by this point in the text and the three categories appear at best laughably naïve, at worst offensive and culturally insensitive. Chapter 7 of the book begins with her outlining the different version of the story of ‘that day, April 30, 1975’ (Bui 2017: 211). Bui describes the ‘American version’ as

one of South Vietnamese cowardice, corruption, and ineptitude [...] South Vietnamese soldiers abandoning their uniforms in the stress [...] Americans crying at their wasted efforts to save a country not worth saving. But Communist forces entered Saigon without a fight, and no blood was shed. (2017: 216)

Whereas Tran’s subversion of the classic narrative is bound up in the existence of the book itself – the fact that it exists is enough to be a statement against the classic narrative – Bui goes one step further and makes it explicit (see Figure 3). Not only does she clearly outline the stereotypes, highlighting their true nature, but she also clarifies the multivalent story of the Fall of Saigon, which was encapsulated in Hubert van Es’ photograph 22 *Gia Long Street* and the retreat narrative put forward by the United States.

Figure 3: – *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui 2017: 211. © Abram Comic Arts. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

In the US-centric view, April 1975 signalled the end of the war. Tran and Bui know that this is most certainly not the case and that the war lives on in their experiences and family histories, in their understandings of certain pieces of their culture, and in the homes they make for their children. Bui describes the conflict in the form of a chessboard – a ‘game of war and strategy’; she writes, ‘my grandparents, my parents, my sisters, and me – we weren’t any of the

pieces on the chessboard' (2017: 185). For her, as for Tran, the conflict extending long beyond the Fall of Saigon, becoming intensified in the microcosm of the family's struggle to rebuild and relocate, managing their identities as both exemplar refugees and nuanced individuals. Tran uses a similar board game visual metaphor, this time using Scrabble, to represent the struggles the family has faced in relocating to the United States and acclimating to a markedly different culture. In one double-page image, a Scrabble board is laid out, with words including 'threatening', 'culture' and 'foreign' (Tran 2010: 108-09). To the side of the board 'four letters forming "home" appear un-played beside the board, indicative of the feeling of homelessness prevalent throughout the refugees' experiences' (Kaus 2016: 5). Scrabble is used throughout Tran's story; he is shown playing the game with his grandmother and his older sister, both during intense conversations about family and identity (Tran 2010: 100, 236). These two parallel metaphors are representative of the ability of the comics form to reinvigorate existing narrative techniques. In creating a narrative palimpsest on the board games, itself a form of entertainment recognised across cultural divides, both artists are able to convey large swathes of individual personal histories that may be alien to the reader, while framing the narratives themselves in an object that is recognizable. The board game frame acts as a cultural leveller, while standing as an excellent example of the power of comics to represent the often-intangible nuance of individual histories. As Edward Said claims,

comics seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures [...] I felt that comics free me to think and imagine and see differently. (Said in Whitlock 2006: 967)

Both Tran and Bui are taking a narrative that we assume we know well – the classic Vietnam story – and drastically reframing it. A story of intervention, militarism and heroism becomes one of invasion, family struggle and reclamation of national histories.

How do these comics compare to the US-centric mainstream? It may appear that the only thing they have in common is the focus on a specific conflict, even though each aspect is framed differently across the two types of narrative. However, at the level of the story arcs, there are similarities in both narrative technique and framing devices, as I discuss in due course. However, first it is necessary to introduce *The 'Nam* and explain the ethos of this publication. *The 'Nam* was first released over a decade after the end of the war; mainstream comics sales had increased massively during the war and servicemen were a key market. The series follows the constraints of both the Marvel 'house style' and the guidelines of the Comics Code Authority, narrowing the options of the creators to a large degree, as I discuss elsewhere (Earle 2017). These constraints combined create a text that ignores many aspects of the soldiers' experience of Vietnam (notably swearing and drug usage) but also creates a series that can speak to some of the intense trauma that many servicemen endured. The series included retellings of historical events of the war, including the Tet Offensive and the shooting of Eddie Adams' famous *Saigon Execution* photograph (Adams 1968). *Vietnamerica* and *TBWCD* discuss historical events and their direct impact on the creators' families to tie together personal and national narratives; in *The 'Nam* the events are used to lend legitimacy to the representations within the series.

One pair of scenes in particular demonstrates the similarity in stories at the formal level. In *Vietnamerica*, Tran recounts the story of his parents' courtship and marriage through a letter from his uncle, Vinh, to his mother, Dzung, and her reply. Vinh has been drafted into the ARVN. His letter appears in fragments over fifteen pages. The juxtaposition between the letter

fragments and the images is jarring in some places and oddly harmonious in others. In Vinh's letter, he worries about his sister's engagement to an older man, the panels show Dzung introducing her partner, Tri, to her parents and their subsequent marriage. The narrative told in the images then follows the couple through the birth of their first child and a series of quotidian scenes that are typical for such a family. The letter, despite being written by an active serviceman in theatre, speaks mostly of Vinh's boredom and the lack of any entertainment or enjoyment for him and his fellow troops. Dzung's reply is set against a very different set of panels. At first we see the banality that Vinh described; he is pictured sitting on a beach with his fellow servicemen, laughing and joking. As the letter fragment asks, 'will the army let you come home to celebrate [Tet] with us?', Vinh triggers a landmine; the explosion draws enemy fire (Tran 2010: 175). The letter fragments ask Vinh to stay safe and to write soon, as the panels show a terrified group of soldiers running for cover (see Figure 4). The final page of the scene shows Vinh, lying on the sand and bleeding heavily from a gunshot wound. The violence of the action jars with the softness of the letter's words. They are obviously written by a concerned sister who fears the exact events that are occurring in the panels themselves. The image of the dying Vinh is presented as a bleed on the verso of the page. As the page is turned, the reader moves from the panicked eyes of Vinh to his prone body. The extreme juxtaposition of letter and action are made manifest in the violence of the image. The epistolary framing device ties the everyday lives of Vietnamese civilians with the combat roles of the ARVN, bringing into harsh focus the extremes of daily life that were experienced by the Vietnamese during the war. Figure 4 Placement

Figure 4: *Vietnamerica*, GB Tran (2010: 176). © Penguin Random House. Image presented under Fair Use legislation.

The use of an epistolary framing device occurs in several issues of *The 'Nam*, a Marvel series that ran from 1986 to 1993. The series began by following the tour of Private Ed Marks and his fellow servicemen during their twelve-month tours. Elsewhere, I have discussed the series at length and outlined the ways in which it both subscribes to and provides a counter-narrative to the classic Vietnam story.⁴ *The 'Nam* places Manichean depictions of conflict alongside nuanced representations of trauma. The series has little in common with either *Vietnamerica* or *The Best We Could Do*. We find common ground in the use of the epistolary frame. In *From Cedar Falls, with Love*, the narrative follows Marks' letter to his parents and, as with Vinh's letter in *Vietnamerica*, the words and images do not relate to each other (Murray and Golden 2010). Marks describes the events of Operation Cedar Falls in straightforward language that does not capture the full horror of his experiences. Marks describes tasks as innocuous as 'helping to cordon the perimeter', a description accompanied by an image of a Vietnamese man on a bike being shot in the back with an M14 rifle. In the next panel, Marks explains that 'it wasn't an easy job but on the whole we managed to do it' (Murray and Golden 2010: 36). The captions alone produce a calm and relatively banal account, neither lie nor truth. For Marks, as with so many soldiers, his key concern is his own survival and the survival of his fellow soldiers. Whereas for Tran, the disjunction between image and word demonstrates the gaps in understanding between family members, even those of the same generation, for Marks in *The 'Nam* the disjunction is in his perception of events.

These examples show that the experiences of war are not so different across populations, despite what the gross disparity in national narratives may say. The US-centric mainstream and contemporary memoir comics have a common ancestor and the narrative techniques that are used are not dissimilar. The cruder message here is that there is common ground between the individual participants of conflict. These individuals have families and write letters. The broader issue of the epistolary frame relates to the comics form and the

limitations of narratives of trauma. In both Tran and *The 'Nam*, the letters themselves do not reveal the true horrors of the conflict; the recipient is none the wiser. Neither, too, do the images convey all dimensions of the conflict. They may represent the raw facts but it is in the disjunction of word and image that the truth of the matter is found. There is no way for the letters' recipients to truly understand, nor is there a way for the letter writers (witnesses to the events) to articulate. This is the crux of the trauma of the narrative. This is also the crux of the identity crisis that both Tran and Bui are working through in their respective texts. They are the letter recipients of their own family history and they struggle to understand the stories of the war in which their families grew and, in the case of Bui, into which they were born.

Why is this important? These two sets of comics have little in common. It is likely that the readership groups do not overlap; a reader looking for a Vietnam War comic is more likely to head for *The 'Nam* than *Vietnamerica*. However, these are very important distinctions. As I have argued, the two moves that have occurred in comics of conflict are clearly demarked here. We have moved from glorification in *Our Army at War* (1952–77) and *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* (1963–81) to foregrounding the traumatic response of returned veterans in later issues of *The 'Nam* (1986–93) and *Punisher: Born* (2003). The intense televisual images of Vietnam that made up the majority of war coverage for millions of Americans made glorification a hard pill to swallow. The move to a traumatocentric narrative has much to do with the introduction of PTSD as a viable psychiatric diagnosis and the demonstrable rise in returning vets with serious psychological damage following their tours. The second move – from US-centric military comics to family-focussed narratives that re-centre the Vietnamese people within their own conflict – has much to do with the growth of comics memoir. These are not war comics in the strictest sense; instead, they are what Gillian Whitlock refers to as 'webs

of narrative: micronarratives of familial life and macronarratives of collective identity, codes of established narratives that define our capacities to weave individual life stories' (2007: 11).

Comics memoir is among the fastest growing and most highly critically acclaimed of all comics genres over the past few decades; a large number of these memoirs concentrate on violent or traumatic life experiences. As Whitlock writes,

Autobiography is a cultural space where relations between the individual and society are thought out intensely and experienced intersubjectively; here the social, political, and cultural underpinnings of thinking about the self come to the surface and are affirmed in images, stories, and legends. (2007: 11–12)

For comics of conflict, this cultural space created in the comics form is the staging area for a new kind of conflict – the type that is largely ignored in earlier mainstream war comics. It is the conflict of identity and personal history that becomes central in comics memoir; the spatial positioning of comics allows the artist to '[find] room to manoeuvre amid spaces of contradiction and extreme states of violent contestation' (Whitlock 2007: 194). For Hillary Chute, 'comics can express life stories [...] powerfully because it makes literal the presence of the past by disrupting spatial and temporal conventions to overlay or palimpsest past and present' (2011: 109). Tran and Bui do just this. Their lives become part of the tapestry of their families, intricately bound up with the national history of Vietnam and decades of colonial occupation.

These comics refer to a conflict that officially ended over 40 years ago but demonstrate myriad possibilities for representations of displaced persons and civilian-conflict narratives. That they have taken a conflict that is generally 'known' and are approaching it from a new dimension not only allows us to form questions regarding whether we really do 'know' these

events at all but also creates a framework of representation that can be taken up by the ‘other side’ of more recent international conflicts. We are already seeing comics war memoirs from previously ignored perspectives; key examples include Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (Satrapi 2000) and Riad Sattouf’s *The Arab of the Future* (Sattouf 2015), both of which give voice to the children of conflict and use a naïve perspective to reframe complex geopolitical struggles through the eye of an innocent witness. Both *Vietnamerica* and *TBWCD* engage with the child witness but in different ways. Bui recalls her own childhood, viewing her past naiveté through mature eyes to reconcile her past and present thoughts on her own identity, while Tran uses the voice of his mother and her memories in tandem with his understanding of his own childhood to reconstruct his personal narrative of the conflict. Both texts, along with the works of Sattouf and Satrapi, as well as the conflict narratives of comics journalists such as Joe Sacco and Sarah Glidden, demonstrate that these events and their myriad perspectives not only deserve attention but demand it. It is only through a nuanced understanding of a conflict event that we can begin to understand it; texts such as *Vietnamerica* and *TBWCD*, which explicitly reframe existing conflict narratives, are an excellent first step towards a wider understanding of the importance of this kind of nuance.

Developing comics as a way to present contrasting perspectives on conflict gives voice to those who are otherwise silenced by mainstream narratives of conflict. The use of comics for the empowerment of war-torn or displaced communities is a theme that I will be carrying forward in future research and is a growing area of academic interest within the field. Recent interventions into comics and empowerment include Sarah McNicol’s work with the Graphic Lives project, a group of British-Bangladeshi women who are telling their stories through digital comics (see McNicol 2018). McNicol’s project involves direct community engagement with the individuals involved, but a host of comics texts have done similar things, including Marjane Satrapi’s *Embroideries* (2003), which visual depicts a conversation between several

generations of Iranian women; the ever-increasing interest in graphic memoir, representations of violence and comics as a form for political and social engagement demonstrate further both the shifting of the academic landscape and the foregrounding of personal narrative in our understanding of the world.

Nguyen describes 'the industry of memory' as '[incorporating] the processes of individual memory, the collective nature of its making, and the social contexts of its meanings' (2015: 312). The American industry of Vietnam memory excludes large portions of the social contexts. The American-Vietnamese industry, as exemplified in Tran and Bui, brings in the portion that the classic narrative excludes. Ultimately, both Tran and Bui are using their texts to reclaim their history. Both texts are deeply concerned with the Vietnam-shaped hole in their experiences and identity. For Bui, this is configured as a literal hole in the distinctive shape of the country. Thi stares at a shadow of the country's outline, with the hole in her body passing right through (Bui 2017: 36). Tran's representation of this hole is less literal: his lack of knowledge of Vietnamese custom and tradition ('Why didn't you tell me the Vietnamese mourn in white instead of black?') creates cultural distance that alienates him from his roots (2010: 12). Nguyen opens his study of the Vietnam War in memory by telling us that 'all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory' (2016: 4). The comic space becomes the battlefield for their retelling of this new Vietnamese-centric narrative. These texts do not replace the classic narrative of Vietnam, but they sit alongside it to offer a counter-narrative to that which is put in place by American mythmakers, rounding out the characters and ensuring that the struggles of the Vietnamese – and their own stories of the war – are not lost.

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Notes

¹ Although Tran and Bui – as well as some critics – use Vietnamese diacritics in their rendering of proper nouns, I have chosen not to do so. This is both due to the availability of such marks on a standard English keyboard and also to avoid issues of pronunciation for readers who have no knowledge of Vietnamese pronunciation. In addition, I use the term 'American' to refer to the United States of America. While 'America' can be seen as a broad term encompassing all of North America (or indeed all of both Americas), in common usage 'American' is known to refer to the United States. This is the usage I am preserving here for clarity and ease of reading.

² Although the popularity of Vietnam-centric feature film and television has diminished since the turn of the twenty-first century, this is not to say that the topic is no longer explored. Indeed, as I write this, Steven Spielberg's political drama *The Post* is in cinemas. This film follows the events surrounding the *Washington Post's* 1971 publication of the Pentagon Papers and subsequent legal ramifications for the press, a topic which has considerable contemporary interest and relevance to the current American political situation. Furthermore, last September *PBS* aired a ten-part documentary series on Vietnam, the most comprehensive to date.

³ As the artist appears as a character within the story, I use the first name to refer to the character and the surname to refer to the artist so as to avoid confusion.

⁴ See (anonymized).